

## Russia's new strategic calculus in the Middle East \*

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There has been a lot of ambiguity concerning Russia's recent policy in the Middle East, especially about its causes, scope and consequences. While some say that Moscow "does not have a Grand Strategy for the Middle East it has a clear view of its interests in specific situations within the region"<sup>1</sup> that serves the Kremlin's higher and broader goals of reestablishing Russia as one of the key actors in international affairs. This article argues that Moscow's diplomatic, military and economic actions in the Middle East, represent an example of a type of grand strategic behaviour embodied in a flexible and pragmatic policy that goes far beyond *ad hoc* tactical gains.

### ***Making sense of Russia's strategic behaviour***

Since 2015, there has been a significant increase in Russia's military and diplomatic presence in the Middle East and North Africa Region (MENA). The most notable was the country's intervention in Syria (launched in September 2015) that helped the regime of President Bashar al-Assad to remain in power. With the relative success of Moscow's actions in Syria, Russia reasserted itself in the MENA region as a major actor and serious weapons supplier. In terms of diplomatic gains, the Kremlin has become an important player in mediating conflicts from Libya to Yemen and an aspiring power broker in Syria. Moreover, Russia's economic and energy activities in the region have also been on the rise: state-owned companies (Rosneft, Lukoil) have oil and gas projects in Algeria, and Libya while in Egypt, Russian nuclear energy giant Rosatom is set to build and operate a 4,800 MW nuclear plant.<sup>2</sup>

Russia's presence in the region has stirred many debates on Russian foreign policy and the degree to which it constitutes a strategic design or rather something more opportunistic.

\* This paper is the result of a research conducted by the author while being an Eisenhower Fellow at the NATO Defense College between September and November 2019.

1 D. Trenin, *What is Russia up to in the Middle East?*, Cambridge, Polity, 2018, p.86.

2 M. Russell, E. Pichon, "Russia in Africa", *European Parliamentary Research Service*, November 2019.

While most experts acknowledge the return of Russia to the Middle East, there is no consensus about the scope and policy goals.<sup>3</sup> As a 2017 RAND report stated, Russia's actions suggest that it is "applying a generalized, functional strategy. It constantly seeks to improve its short-term economic, military, and political advantages while reducing the short-term advantages of prospective adversaries".<sup>4</sup>

However, in an attempt to understand Russia's actions in the Middle East and beyond, it is helpful to apply a slightly different framework that offers a more substantive explanation for the character and nature of the Kremlin's policies. According to such a framework, three different meanings of Grand Strategy should be differentiated: grand plans; grand principles and grand behaviour.<sup>5</sup>

Grand Strategy is a multifaceted and thoroughly debated concept. For the purpose of this analysis, grand strategy is understood to be, in the words of Barry Posen, "a nation-state's theory about how to produce security for itself" and is mainly used here as a "conceptual framework that helps nations determine where they want to go and how they ought to get there".<sup>6</sup> This article does not refer to its more restricted meaning of "a plan for using military means to achieve political ends", but rather to a broader overarching scheme of ideas, plans and behavior that explains state's vital strategic policies in international affairs.<sup>7</sup> This provides a more practical and up to date approach of analysis for Russia's circumstances in the region.

The argument here underscores the idea that Russia has a type of grand (strategic) behaviour in world affairs, in which behaviour in the Middle East region is only one – not necessarily the most important – element. As the political nature of the Russian Federation's regime makes it difficult to monitor Moscow's *grand plans*; and as interests rather than *grand principles* traditionally drive Russia's foreign policy, grand strategic behaviour appears to be the most tangible (and visible) element of Russian statecraft. In other words, since the longstanding autocratic political system prevents transparent access to studying both official strategic objectives (*grand plans*) and the policy-making process, it is through examining the long-term pattern in Russia's allocation of military, diplomatic and economic resources (grand behaviour), that one is able to make sense of the Kremlin's increased activity in the

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3 A. Shumilin, I. Shumilina, "Russia as a gravity pole of the GCC's new foreign policy pragmatism", *The International Spectator*, 2017; M. Kofman and M. Rojansky, "What kind of victory for Russia in Syria?", *Military Review*, 2018.

4 J. Sladden, B. Wasser, B. Connable, S. Grand-Clement, "Russian strategy in the Middle East", *Perspective Paper*, RAND Corporation, Washington, DC, 2017.

5 N. Silove, "Beyond the buzzword: the three meanings of 'Grand Strategy'", *Security Studies*, Vol.27, No.1, 2017, pp.27-57.

6 H. Brands, *What good is Grand Strategy? Power and purpose in American statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2014, p.3; B. R. Posen, *Restraint: a new foundation for US Grand Strategy*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2014, p.1.

7 R. K. Betts, "Is strategy an illusion?", *International Security*, Vol.25. No.2, Fall 2000, p.6.

Middle East.

Even though Russia does not have a conventionally understood Grand Strategy, neither at the regional nor global level, its policy in the Middle East could be viewed functionally as a type of *grand behaviour* – defined as “the long-term pattern in [a] state’s distribution and employment of military, diplomatic, and economic resources towards ends”<sup>8</sup> – typical of great powers. Thus, Russia’s Middle East policy is a sort of indirect strategy with limited objectives and relatively modest resources. The Kremlin seems to view its regional behaviour as a chance to build up international prestige on the cheap (military engagement in Syria; paramilitaries present in both Syria and Libya; tightening the economic ties with Egypt and Algeria; increasing arms sales to regional powers). Additionally, Moscow’s diplomatic, economic and military presence in the region should be understood not only in terms of a response to power vacuums and the weakness of external actors in the Middle East, but also in the context of a more proactive domestically-driven Kremlin approach towards international affairs in its attempts to remake the international order.

### *Old game made new?*

The roots of contemporary Russian foreign policy behaviour can be traced to the 1990s, to the so-called Primakov Doctrine. As it was named after former Foreign Minister (1996–98) and Prime Minister (1998–99) Yevgeny Primakov, the doctrine stated that a unipolar world dominated by the United States would be unacceptable to Russia. And therefore it offered countermeasures or guidelines for Russian foreign policy: “Russia should strive toward a multipolar world managed by a concert of major powers that can counterbalance US unilateral power. Russia should insist on its primacy in the post-Soviet space and lead integration in that region. Russia should oppose NATO expansion”.<sup>9</sup> All of these elements remain at the core of Russia’s foreign policy with the first point directly related to Russian engagement in the Middle East. Thus, Russia’s actions today signal a return to policies resembling those of Primakov in a new context.

One of the predominant narratives about Moscow’s return to the Middle East frames Russian intervention in Syria as a first and initial step on the way to Russian increased diplomatic, economic and military presence in the region. Experts seem to agree on the scope of the Kremlin’s policy in the Middle East, stressing that military intervention in Syria plays an important role in Russia’s greater plan or even “broader strategy”.<sup>10</sup> According to

8 *Ibid.*, p.49.

9 E. Rumer, *The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in action*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 5 June, 2019.

10 See F. C. Hof, V. Inozemtsev *et al.*, “The Kremlin’s actions in Syria: origins, timing, and prospects”, Atlantic Council, 2016; N. Popescu, S. Secieru (eds.), “Russia’s return to the Middle East. Building sandcastles?”, *Chaillot Papers* 146, Paris,

some, there are elements of strategic thinking in Moscow's behaviour that go not only beyond Syria but beyond the Middle Eastern context. They include domestic concerns about potential terrorist connections (Moscow's fears of radical jihadi movements in the Caucasus); bringing Russia back to the main stage of world affairs; and forcing NATO and the West (mainly the United States) to talk to Russia "as an equal", thereby making the issue of Ukraine and Crimea less relevant.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Russia's relative success in Syria created the foundation for its comeback as a significant regional player equipped with substantial negotiating power to shape the future of Syria and the broader region itself.<sup>12</sup> In this way Syria has been a testing ground for Russia's reformed military, showcasing new weapons for arms exports in the region and beyond.

### ***From revisionist to status quo power***

Yet Moscow's growing interest in the region predates its military intervention in Syria and can be traced back to the year 2011 and the aftermath of Arab Uprisings,<sup>13</sup> including the war in Libya. In fact, NATO's intervention in Libya – that (inadvertently) resulted in the toppling of the Gadhafi regime – has often been cited by Russian officials as the trigger that hastened Russian diplomatic, economic and military engagement in the MENA region. In February 2012 Vladimir Putin stated that since basic "principles of international law were eroded and degraded" directly affecting international security, "Russia cannot fall back on diplomatic and economic methods alone to settle contradiction and resolve conflict".<sup>14</sup> Therefore "it faces the task of developing its military potential as part of a deterrence strategy".<sup>15</sup> This view was reinforced by the Russian political elite's fear of so-called "coloured revolutions" in Russia's immediate neighbourhood, perceived by the Kremlin in terms of a security threat.

In the context of the Arab uprisings, the Kremlin framed itself as a status quo power (that resonated well with regional regimes concerned about losing their power grip in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings), blaming the US and NATO for "meddling in the domestic affairs of other states" and consequently for regime changes and chaos that ensued in the

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European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2018.

11 E. Stepanova, "Russia in the Middle East: back to a 'Grand Strategy' – or enforcing multilateralism?", *Politique étrangère*, No.2/2016, p.8.

12 For more on the drivers behind Russia's new policy in the Middle East, see E. Stepanova, "Russia and conflicts in the Middle East: regionalisation and implications for the West", *The International Spectator*, 2018.

13 N. Kozhanov, *Russian policy across the Middle East: motivations and methods*, Chatham House, London, 2018.

14 V. Putin, "Being strong: national security guarantees for Russia", *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 20 February 2012.

15 *Ibid.*

region.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, Russia's presence and actions in the region are not without limits. Moscow does not appear to have the intention or resources to "own" the Middle East; rather Russia's "strategic game plan is to construct a 'polycentric world order' where the US will not be a hegemon [and] more non-Western states have a role to play".<sup>17</sup> In other words, Russia's *grand behaviour* in the Middle East constitutes a type of modern version of the Primakov Doctrine.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Projecting Instability? Implications for NATO's Southern Flank***

Russia's renewed interests and behaviour may be analyzed in both a regional and global framework. From a regional perspective, the Kremlin's engagement in the Middle East indicates a mutual understanding between Moscow and its partners, that the Russian diplomatic and economic (and to some extent military) presence represents a positive and stabilizing force in a region that for the last two decades has been struggling with foreign military interventions, civil wars and popular uprisings. Beyond the Middle East, Russia's regional policy is interconnected with Moscow's ambition to counter the West – most notably the United States, which has been increasingly viewed as an adversary. In this regard, Russia's role in the region can be viewed as a by-product of confrontation with the West.<sup>19</sup> If one accepts the above statement, this raises the question of the practical effects of Russia's new military (Syria, Libya) and diplomatic (i.e. Egypt, Iran, Turkey, the Gulf States) activities *vis-a-vis* NATO's security on the Southern Flank.

Considering NATO's relations with regional partners (i.e. Istanbul Cooperation Initiative and Mediterranean Dialogue) and its broader agenda of Projecting Stability, the Alliance should be wary of any emerging initiatives that could potentially undermine partnerships with MENA states.

There is the obvious connection between Russia's policy in MENA and NATO's security on the Southern Flank. It stems from the fact that threats from North Africa and the Middle East – ungoverned spaces, weak states and transnational threats such as terrorism, drug gangs, human traffickers and weapons smugglers – are of a different security nature than those coming from the Eastern Flank. Wars in Syria and Libya have

16 B. Renz, "Russian responses to the changing character of war", *International Affairs*, Vol.95, Iss.4, July 2019, p.829.

17 M. Suchkov quoted in T. O'Connor, "The new Middle East: US military, Russia's diplomacy and China's Money", *Newsweek*, 22 October 2019.

18 E. Rumer, *The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in Action*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 5 June, 2019.

19 N. Kozhanov, *Russian policy across the Middle East: motivations and methods*, Chatham House, London, 2018.

caused the largest refugee crisis affecting the EU and NATO's European member states since World War II. And even though NATO does not need to deter Russia in the south, this does not mean that the Kremlin cannot indirectly impact NATO's security with its activities in the region. On the contrary, Russia's restored presence in the Middle East – especially its military intervention in Syria – made Moscow a serious, if not the main, player in the Syrian peace process. This includes any important negotiations concerning external powers in the conflict (Turkey and Iran). Likewise, Kremlin's support of Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army has added to the already complicated civil war in Libya.

Considering the complex relations and interdependence of most actors engaged in the Syrian and Libyan wars, a scenario in which Russia uses its deal-making power to affect one of NATO's southern member states or partners is not unlikely. And such a move would constitute a textbook justification of Kremlin policy in the Middle East, one aimed at regaining Moscow's status as a major global and regional player. Secondly, Russia's improved relations with other significant powers in the region provide opportunities for the Kremlin to position itself as the main outside power in the MENA Region. With closer economic ties to Algeria and Egypt (the energy project to build a nuclear power plant) and active "investments" and "weapon systems sales" diplomacy in the Gulf, Moscow is looking to cement its role in the region as a shareholder of the overall security architecture.<sup>20</sup> Given the delicate balance of power in the Gulf Region between Iran and Arab monarchies and the military campaign in Syria, demand for Russian defence systems (mainly S-400s) among Gulf States is high.<sup>21</sup>

Notwithstanding the fact that certain local countries (i.e. Saudi Arabia; the United Arab Emirates; Jordan) rely on the security guarantees of some member states (mainly the US, the UK and France), a possible change of status quo could affect regional security unfavourably and undermine NATO's Projecting Stability project.

In short, on the Southern Flank there is a new (returning) power that has to be reckoned with. Whether in Syria, Libya, Egypt, or (to a lesser extent) the Gulf States, Russia has established a foothold. For NATO's European members, this means that there is another, potentially threatening factor to consider in the region.

### ***Misperceptions on Russia's "grand behaviour"?***

Russia's grand behaviour in the region could potentially create a challenge for NATO's cohesion and unity. Considering how important the Southern Flank is for the Alliance and how complex threats emerging from the region are, allowing a major adversarial power

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20 L. Watanbe, "Russia's Renaissance in the Arab World", *Strategic Trends* 2019.

21 J. Raine, "Russia in the Middle East: hard power, hard fact", London, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2018.

– and for the time being, Russia remains one<sup>22</sup> – to become a key playmaker across the MENA region for years to come, is a costly mistake. The recent spat between some NATO member states over Turkey's military intervention in Syria, coupled with a looming danger to stability from various violent non-state actors and state-sponsored militias, underscore the need for approaching disruption on the Southern Flank comprehensively.

A potential first step to counter Russia's "grand behaviour" would be stronger engagement with partners (Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative) and raising the situational awareness of the Southern NATO members about the Kremlin's ability to shape the situation in their immediate neighbourhood (i.e. Syria, Libya, potentially Egypt). What NATO can offer to its partners in MENA (that Russia cannot) is a long-lasting cooperation scheme that goes beyond ad hoc interests and addresses common security challenges (securing trade sea-lanes; transnational crime and terrorist threats) that, due to geographic proximity, affect both NATO members in the Southern Flank and the Alliance's partners.

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22 NATO Leaders' Meeting in London reaffirmed that "Russia's aggressive actions constitute a threat to Euro-Atlantic security", "London Declaration", North Atlantic Council, London, 3-4 December 2019.